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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001519

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS

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SUBJECT: EAP DAS JOHN MEETING WITH ACTIVIST GOTHOM AREEYA

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b)

11. (C) SUMMARY: EAP DAS Eric John met with academic and democracy activist Gothom Areeya on March 8 to discuss the current political situation in Burma. Gothom, a member of the human rights NGO Forum Asia and the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), outlined a compromise solution to the current impasse -- which Prime Minister Thaksin is unlikely to accept. Thaksin, thinking of business considerations only, had underestimated the political impact of the sale of Shin Corp. Gothom warned that the political crisis could negatively affect Thai society because Thaksin did in fact enjoy majority support which the minority opposition refused to accept. The impasse might not be resolved in time for the 60th anniversary of the King's accession to the throne in June. END SUMMARY

12. (C) On March 8 DAS Eric John and Ambassador Boyce met with noted academic and human rights activist Gothom Areeya to discuss the current political situation in Thailand. Gothom is an engineering professor at Chulalongkorn University. He was a leader during both the 1973 student protests and the 1991-1992 pro-democracy demonstrations. He currently serves as Secretary General of the human rights NGO Forum Asia and was appointed to serve as a member of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) which is seeking a solution to the conflict in far southern Thailand.

A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT NEEDED, BUT...

13. (C) Gothom said there was still room for a negotiated settlement to the current political impasse. He suggested a scenario where Thaksin would step down as prime minister -- even if he receives more than 50 percent of the vote -- but would remain leader of Thai Rak Thai. This would give Thaksin the face-saving ability to claim he was still in charge while providing the political space for both sides to discuss constitutional reform. A new election could be held in a year's time. "We need to create space to allow a dialogue to take place."

14. (C) Gothom agreed his scenario was more hopeful than practical because Thaksin was unlikely to choose accommodation. Gothom opined that Thaksin was not satisfied with merely winning but felt a need to dominate politics. He had repeatedly shown that he was not content with majority rule, but wanted full power. The confrontation was likely to continue for some time.

15. (C) Gothom speculated that the election would proceed as scheduled on April 2 but turnout would be low because voters had little motivation to participate in an election without real choice. Gothom predicted that the situation would not be resolved in time for the King's 60th anniversary in June. He said a scenario could evolve where the contending sides agreed to a pause in the crisis to allow the anniversary celebration, and then the confrontation would resume in July.

THAKSIN WAS THINKING ABOUT BUSINESS, NOT POLITICS

16. (C) Gothom said the poorly timed sale of Shin Corp. to Singapore's Temasek was simply a business decision, and that Thaksin had not thought through the political consequences. Thaksin actually believed that the sale would not affect the ongoing opposition protests, which he had largely ignored up to that point. The deal had been under negotiation for a year. The change in the foreign ownership provision for telecom companies had given Thaksin a window of opportunity to sell, and he did so.

"WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY IS THAILAND GOING TO HAVE?"

17. (C) Gothom acknowledged that the Prime Minister still enjoyed considerable popular support. While Thaksin rules with the consent of the majority of Thais, the dissenting minority is so obstinately opposed to him that they would not allow him to remain in office. This was a crucial time in Thai history. "We have to figure out what kind of democracy

we are going to have."

18. (C) Gothom noted that the poor and rural voters were willing to accept Thaksin's corruption because his populist programs were actually producing tangible results. But the Thai middle class refused to accept the inherent unfairness of Thaksin's actions, and the elite are unwilling to accept him personally. Gothom warned that the situation could have a deep impact on Thai society. If the majority of Thais -- mostly rural poor -- feel that an elite minority has thrown out the person they elected, there could be a strong reaction.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE NRC?

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19. (C) Turning to the National Reconciliation Commission, Gothom said that the Commission would complete its recommendations on how to address the root causes of southern violence by March 27. However, the NRC would wait to release the report until after the political situation had stabilized.

COMMENT

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10. (C) Gothom makes an interesting observation that the impasse might not be resolved prior to the June 12-13 celebration of the King's 60th year on the throne. Most analysts have predicted that the King's anniversary celebration -- which will bring heads of state and media from around the world -- would create a deadline for Thaksin and the opposition to reach a resolution. However, a "pause" in the crisis would not be unprecedented in Thailand. During the 1992 democracy crisis, both sides made a tacit agreement to pause the confrontation for the Miss Universe pageant to take place in Bangkok. The prospect of a protracted political stalemate should not be ruled out. END COMMENT

11. (U) DAS John did not have the opportunity to clear this message.  
BOYCE